

## **Notes on the Pioneer Missionaries of the Lower Saint John**

**(The Period 1604 - 1731)**

by

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In the pages of the early period of New Brunswick history, we find frequent reference to the devotion and the zeal of the noble band of missionaries who labored so well and so faithfully in the Land of Acadia.

These valiant bearers of the cross, seemed to scorn fatigue and physical discomfort, in order to make known the doctrines of our holy religion to the aboriginal tribes of New France.

Because of their extraordinary work in bringing to many souls the knowledge of God and the glory of His Holy Name, we should hold the names of the pioneer missionaries in grateful remembrance.

It was surely not for an earthly reward that the heroic priests ministered to the natives in our land, while exposed to disease, to hunger and, sometimes, even to starvation. It is clear that the motive which inspired them was the love of God, in whose service they labored courageously.

Father LeClerq, a Recollet, draws attention to this point in his book, published in Paris in the year 1691, giving "An account of the laborious voyage of the author on his way to announce the Faith to the Gaspesians (Micmacs) of Port Croix (Miramachi)."

With the aid of a translation by Dr. W. F. Ganong we give the words of the good missionary: – "It is very true that God alone is able to alleviate by the unction of His grace, the apostolic labors of the arduous missions of New France; also one may as well acknowledge frankly that all the forces of nature serve only to increase the troubles of the missionaries if the cross of a crucified God does not communicate to them a part of that glorious power – by which He triumphed gloriously – It was without doubt with this thought that the Apostle Paul said that he could endure everything with the favor of Him who gave the power to attempt all things and to accomplish all for His glory and the salvation of souls."

When the missionaries came to our shores they found the Maliseets living in settlements along the Lower St. John and some Micmacs at a spot near the mouth of the river.

The manner of living of the Indians and the difficulty of learning their language offered a real test to the missionary in his efforts to convert them.

Yet it must be stated to their credit that the Indian folk of New Brunswick received the missionaries with docility. A fact which prompted Rameau to write: – “We do not know of an act of violence committed by the Indians during the time of the French domination.”

The authentic records tell us that DeMonts and Champlain set out from Havre de Grace, France, on March 7th, 1604, for the purpose of founding a French colony in Acadia. On this memorable voyage the famous explorers were accompanied by such notables as Baron Poutrinpourt and a priest, Nicholas Aubry.

We have very little information regarding Father Aubry, but we learn that he was a Parisian, of a good family, an active intelligent person and a naturalist of considerable ability. Whether the zealous Father was with Champlain and, party as an exploration trip was made along the south coast of New Brunswick, is a point about which we have no accurate data. We know, however, that he attended the colonists in the settlement founded on St. Croix (Dochet) Island, which is not far distant from the mouth of the River St. John, discovered by Champlain on June 24th, 1604.

According to the best available information, the name of Pierre Biard, a priest of the Society of Jesus, may well be placed first on the list of the many missionaries who have ministered to the people settled along the banks of the great River St. John.

Father Pierre Biard was born at Grenoble, France in 1567. In due time he became a professor of Scholastic Theology at Lyons. It was while engaged in this assignment that Father Coton, the King’s confessor and preacher, requested him to take charge of the Jesuit Mission in Acadia. Because of the fact that a considerable number of the future colonists were not of the Catholic belief, opposition was made to the appointment of Father Biard and his companion Father Enemond Massé, as missionaries. Through the efforts of the Marchioness de Guercherville who purchased the vessels bringing out supplies, the Jesuits, after waiting three years, obtained passage by becoming part owners of the ship and its cargo. So, Fathers Biard and Massé sailed from Dieppe, France, January 21st, 1611, and arrived at Port Royal in Acadia, May 22nd, 1611.

The Jesuit Fathers had the happiness of making conversions among the Indians in the vicinity of Port Royal. While the colonists, on the other hand, made unpleasantness by their hostile attitude. In the month of October 1611, Father Biard made a visit to the Lower St. John River district. And we have records to the effects that this missionary celebrated Holy Mass on what is now Caton’s Island, situated about twenty-three miles from the mouth of the River. This is the first recorded Christian service on the historic St. John.

Caton’s or Emenenic Island has another historic event with which it is associated, namely, that it was the site of a European settlement as early as 1610. In the year 1919 the New Brunswick Historical Society had a

memorial tablet placed at a spot on the Island to commemorate the establishment of the settlement.

It is well to remark that Dr. W. O. Raymond in his splendid historical work, *The River Saint John*, gives a lengthy translation of the visit made by Father Biard to Caton's (Emenetic) Island and of his celebrating Holy Mass there.

Father Biard in teaching religion to the Micmacs and Maliseets encountered much difficulty. Not knowing the language and having no instructor available, the priest was obliged to ask the Indians each thing. A task not too hard when the inquiry concerned things within range of the senses; but when it came to such expressions as, "to think, to remember, to forget and to doubt" these indeed gave trouble. "To know these four things," writes Father Biard, "we are compelled to make a thousand gesticulations and signs: in short, we are still disputing, after a great deal of inquiry, whether they have any word to correspond directly to the word Credo – I believe."

The good Father found that it required red skill and much ingenuity to explain certain points of doctrine. And the fact that the missionary accomplished so much for the catechumens redounds to his own earnest efforts and his talents.

A great deal of our information regarding New France and the aborigines has come to us from the facile pen of our Jesuit, Pierre Biard. His descriptions are at once accurate and interesting. His narrative entitled: *A Relation of New France, of its Lands, Nature of the Country and its Inhabitants*, printed in Lyons, France, in 1616, is a valuable contribution to the history of the period.

After spending two years attached to the Port Royal Mission headquarters Father Biard sailed for a place now known as Bar Harbor in Maine. The new colony there was called St. Sauveur. He was not long at this Mission, when Samuel Argall came from Virginia to plunder the colony. Father Biard and another Jesuit, together with four colonists, were taken to Jamestown. An expedition was fitted out to complete the destruction of St. Sauveur and the marauders compelled the two Jesuits to accompany them. Everything was ruined and it was made to appear that the priests had instigated the attack. As the story goes, the priests sailed off with the attacking party, who intended returning with them to the English colony, where they might have been executed. The vessel, however, was driven across the ocean by violent storms. "Frequently the prisoners were on the point of being thrown overboard. When the ship entered the Port of Royal in the Azores, the good Father Biard and his companions consented to remain in the hold because their discovery might have entailed the death of their captor. Shortly afterwards, the Captain was again saved by his prisoners. And, when they entered Milford, Wales, the Captain having no papers and

being in a French vessel was about to be hanged as a pirate, when Father Biard came to his assistance by explaining the situation to the authorities.” Could we wish for better evidence of the charitable heart of the spiritual son of the great St. Ignatius!

After the experience just mentioned, Father Biard went to France. He did not return to New France but resumed his Professorship in Theology. And on Nov. 17th, 1622, he passed to his eternal reward.

The next missionary on our list is Father Enemond Massé whom we have already mentioned as being the companion of Father Pierre Biard on the voyage to the Port Royal Mission. Father Massé was born at Lyons, France, in 1574. He left his home land in 1611 to engage courageously in the arduous task of converting the Indians in that part of Acadia to which he was assigned. He found his way eventually to the St. John River district. There we find him in the winter 1611-2 at the abode of Louis Memberton, which was on a small island at the mouth of the great river. He is mentioned by some writers as having been the first white man to reside in the vicinity of the present city of Saint John. His prime purpose for making his home with Memberton was that he might acquire a better knowledge of the Micmac language, which he had already studied to some extent at the Mission of Port Royal.

History makes mention of the fact that he suffered many hardships during his stay in the St. John district. For a considerable period he was very ill. He describes his experience during the winter as “a life without order, and without daily fare ... always moving and changing . . . for roof a wretched cabin, for couch the earth, for rest and quiet odious cries and songs, for medicine hunger and hard work.”

When he recovered his health sufficiently after his serious illness, the missionary returned to the headquarters at Port Royal. Not long afterwards Father Massé went to the new Mission of St. Sauveur, along the coast of Maine.

On the occasion of the destruction of the Mission by Argall, Father Massé was set adrift on the sea in an open boat. Fortunately he succeeded in reaching a French ship and so was enabled to return to his native France.

But the missionary spirit was really strong in this good priest, so we find him again in Canada, in 1625, this time at Quebec, where he remained until its surrender to the English under Kirke in July, 1629.

On returning to France, Father Massé was given charge of the temporalities at the Royal College of La Fleche. There he directed a number of young men who desired to do missionary work in far-off Canada. So unaffectedly did he speak of his experience in Acadia, that it is not astonishing that after his return to Quebec he was followed by such courageous and zealous priests as Charles Lalemant, Paul Le Jenne, Bartholemew Vimont, Anne De None, Francis Ragueneau, Isaac Jogues and René

Ménard.

The influence of Enemond Massé is aptly stated by Hugh P. Kierans, S.J., in the following passage, "His work in life was to inspire others to great performance; and those who would see him in the evening of life, would do better to place him between Brebeuf and Bressani, saying farewells to them from the porches of Notre Dame des Anges, Massé who had been before Brebeuf in the field and arrived for his work one year before Bressani was born, stands there in the shadows, bent and broken, though in body only, his hair white where Brebeuf's is brown and Bressani's richly black, his hands ridged with twisted blue veins, and by his presence imparts, as some ancient oak amid straight young pines, a sacred sweetness, a kind of recognition of his triumph over pain, or rather of the genuine peace to be found in it by those who have learned its secrets."

At an advanced age the valiant missionary, Enemond Massé passed away at Sillery on May 12th., 1646, and is honored by a monument in front of the old Mission House.

The Indians along the St. John had no priests working among them from the time Fathers Biard and Massé left the district until the year 1619, when a party of Recollet missionaries came to continue the good work for souls. Like the Jesuits who had previously labored on the St. John River, the missionaries from Aquitaine, were unacquainted with the Indian language and unseasoned to the hardships of a Canadian winter. With marked zeal and admirable fortitude they set themselves to the performance of their duties.

Father LeClerq tells us in his narrative that "Father Bernardin, one of those illustrious missionaries, died of hunger and fatigue in traversing the woods on the way from Miscou and Nepisgnit to the river St. John in Acadia, where these reverend Fathers had their principal establishment."

The work of the Recollets was abandoned during the period of the English occupation and renewed in 1633, when the missions on the St. John were re-established.

It is well to point out that following the restoration of Quebec to the French crown in 1632, the spiritual jurisdiction was separated from the mother-country. It was at first constituted into a Vicariate Apostolic by Alexander VII, by a brief which was expedited July 5th, 1657, and in 1674 was erected into a diocese by Clement X. The first Bishop appointed was the renowned Francis de Laval de Montmorency.

After an episcopacy of twenty-six years of outstanding apostolic labors, the great prelate began to feel his strength failing and set out for France with the intention of procuring a co-adjutor and successor. The choice fell upon Jean Baptiste St. Vallier, a priest of great piety and distinguished at court for modesty and regularity of life.

The first pastoral visit to Acadia by Monseigneur St. Valier was in 1686.

In the course of his visitation the Bishop came to Fort Meductic, the principal stronghold of the Maliseets on the St. John River, situated a few miles from the present town of Woodstock. The Bishop's note of his stay at the Fort reads as follows: "The 18th of May 1686 we slept at Medogtik (Meductie) the first fort in Acadia where I greatly cheered a hundred savages during my visit. I told them I came purposely to establish a mission for their benefit. It is to be wished that the French who have abode along the route were so steady in habits as by their example to draw these people to Christianity, but we must hope that in time the reformation of the one will lead to the conversion of the other."

In historical records we find the name of Father Simon, a Recollet, given as being attached to the Mission at Meductic. He is mentioned as being a man of activity and enterprise as well as of religious zeal. The good Father Simon taught the Indians the elements of the faith and made efforts to tame the fierceness of their manners. From John Gyles, who had been captured by the Indians when he was twelve years old, we have this testimony: "The priest of this river was of the order of St. Francis, a gentleman of a humane generous disposition. In his sermons he most severely reprehended the Indians for their barbarities to captives."

Father Simon died at the Meductic Mission near the close of the century after having labored for a period of about twelve years.

We learn that a Jesuit Father, Joseph Aubery, succeeded the Recollet missionary. It is stated that he came to Meductic in 1701 where he carried out his missionary duties for seven years. He was then appointed to the Abenaki mission of St. Francis, remaining there until his death at the age of 82. Although the information as to his work along the St. John is meagre, he is certainly deserving of mention and, of credit. His was no easy task.

We have the name of Father Jean Baptiste Loyard next on the list. He was born at Pan, France, in 1678, and came to Canada as a Jesuit missionary in 1706. In 1708 we find him administering to the people of the St. John River missions with headquarters at Meductic.

Under his direction a church was erected at Meductic. Probably it was the first building set apart for divine worship in the province of New Brunswick. On the original site of this church a small stone tablet was discovered by Mr. A. R. Hay in June 1890. This tablet of black slate, similar to that found in the vicinity, measures fourteen inches in length by seven in width, and has a thickness of one inch. It may be seen at the New Brunswick Museum, Saint John. The inscription, is in a good state of preservation and reads as follows.

Deo  
Opt. Max.  
In honor.D.JOA.Bb.

Hoc Tem. Pos.An:Do.  
MDCC VII  
Malecitae  
M.pJoA.Loyard soc.Jes  
Saerdote

The translation reads: “To God, most excellent, most high, in honor of St. John Baptist, the Maliseets erected this church A.D. 1717, while Jean Loyard, a priest of the society of Jesus, was superintendent of the mission.”

That Father Loyard was highly esteemed by both the French and the Indians is the testimony of the records. As for the English, they too must have appreciated his efforts, because it was under the peaceful sway of this Jesuit Father that the Indians observed their treaty fairly well.

During the twenty-four years of his service in the noble cause, Father Loyard remained almost constantly at his post; with the exception of the year 1722, when he visited Paris to obtain help for his mission. On that occasion he recommended to the court an increase in the annual gratuity to those under his care and providing of a medal for each village as a token of the King’s favor and interest. Apparently his advice was taken, as it is a matter of record that an annual appropriation was made to provide presents for the Indians.

Towards the close of his career, the missionary was summoned to Quebec that he might have rest in order to repair his condition of health. When he had recovered, he requested permission to return to his mission. While actively engaged in the discharge of his duty, he contracted the disease from which he died on his feast-day, June 24th, 1731. The good shepherd passed from life in the midst of his flock. A truly remarkable missionary, noted for his virtues and his goodness, had gone to his reward!

With the name of Joan Baptiste Loyard, S.J., we have come to the end of the list of those early missionaries who worked nobly along the Lower St. John during the period 1604-1731. The lessons we have learned from their spirit of self-sacrifice will help us in making the history of the future.

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